DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 250 EA 030 569

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TITLE	School Reforms in England, Japan, Korea and the U.S.: Policy Variation and Educational Convergence.
PUB DATE	2000-04-26
NOTE	21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, Louisiana, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Accountability; Administrative Organization; Curriculum Development; *Decentralization; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation; Foreign Countries; *Governance; Policy Formation; Public Schools; Student Improvement
IDENTIFIERS	England; Japan; Korea

ABSTRACT

Education reform during the last 2 decades has been shaped by the forces of growing public distrust of educational bureaucracies in a climate of rapid political change and growing international competition in the context of a global economy. Major school reforms in four selected industrial countries that differ significantly in terms of educational institutions and cultures are examined using school reform literature, related government reports, and newspaper articles. Japan and Korea have highly centralized school governance systems and homogeneous educational values. Conversely, in the United States and England, education governance is decentralized, and educational values are relatively heterogeneous. In the latter two countries lack of focus and accountability were identified as major deficiencies of their educational systems, and efforts were made to standardize curriculum, tighten assessment practices, and introduce market-like competition. Similar political and economic challenges in Japan and Korea, on the other hand, resulted in policies to differentiate curriculum, diversify assessment, decentralize school governance, and make the system more diverse and democratic--enhancing whole-person education. (Contains 33 references.) (DFR)

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ED 444 250

School Reforms in England, Japan, Korea and the U.S.: Policy Variation and Educational Convergence

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the AERA (New Orleans, April 26, 2000).

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EA 030569

While school reforms worldwide during the last two decades have been concerned with similar goals and values[1], their organizational articulation tends to vary between countries. Indeed, education reform in many countries during the last two decades seems to have been shaped by two sets of forces. One is growing public distrust of educational bureaucracies in a climate of rapid political change (Wong, 1994a).[2] The other is growing international competition in the context of the global economy (Kearns and Doyle, 1991). Since the consequences of these factors for education policies were also likely to vary between countries with different cultures and institutions, global school reform processes and outcomes would benefit from examination from a comparative perspective.

Building upon this premise, this study examines major school reforms in four selected industrial countries, two (Japan and South Korea) from the East and two (England and the United States) from the West that differ significantly in terms of educational institutions and cultures. Japan and Korea have highly centralized school governance systems and homogeneous educational values. In the United States and England, educational governance is decentralized and educational values are relatively heterogeneous.[3] These four countries were also selected for their contrasting approach to school reform over the last two decades. In England and the U.S., where lack of focus and accountability were identified as major deficiencies of their educational systems, efforts were made to standardize curriculum, tighten assessment practices and introduce market-like competition into their public school systems.[4] Similar political and economic challenges, on the other hand, resulted in policies to differentiate curriculum, diversify assessment, and decentralize school governance in Korea and Japan. In these two countries, uniform control and excessive competition were blamed for the lack of humane education despite their past contributions to academic performance and industrial development. The objective of this study is to understand the variation in school reform policies among those four different countries and to explore their consequences for educational convergence. To this end, this paper reviews school reform literature, related government reports and newspaper articles.

Overview of School Reform Initiatives

Educational reform policies are often geared toward solving unique social or economic problems and are based on the utopian view that educational reform can change schools and advance society. In each of the four study countries, education reform was initiated primarily to solve pressing problems, and gained relatively wide public attention and/or support. Education, specifically public schools, was blamed for broader social or economic problems, and reforming education was seen as a promising solution. However, these reform processes were not always smooth because of many barriers. In the following sections, brief overviews of the four countries' major school reform initiatives during the last two decades are provided.

1. Japan

In Japan, education has played a critical role in national development. Japan has been successful in providing equal educational opportunity and accomplishing high educational standards. On the other hand, the Japanese school system has neglected children's social and emotional development, paying exclusive attention to academic achievement. Since the 1970s, serious problems have been identified, including high rates of suicide in children, children refusing to attend school, violence in school and homes, and insidious school bullying. There has also been increasing public criticism expressing distrust of schools, teachers, and the education sector as a whole. The educational system in Japan was in a grave 'state of desolation' and awareness of these problems has caused nationwide educational reform efforts (Sasamori, 1993).

The National Council on Education Reform (NCER) was established in 1984, as an ad hoc advisory committee to then Prime Minister Nakasone. The Council submitted four reports in which it identified fundamental principles for educational reform: (1) putting emphasis on

individuality; (2) putting emphasis on fundamentals; (3) the cultivation of creativity, thinking ability, and power of expression; (4) the expansion of opportunities for choices; (5) the humanization of the educational environment; (6) the transition to lifelong learning; (7) coping with internationalization; (8) coping with the Information Age. The NCER described its mission as nothing less than completing the third great educational reform in modern Japanese history that was begun by the Central Council on Education in 1974 (Lincicombe, 1993).

School reform policies that the Ministry of Education actually enforced based on the recommendations from the Council were very limited (Sasamori, 1993). Educational reform lost impetus in the midst of the resignation of Nakasone cabinet and political turnover, and policy adoption lagged.[5] Moreover, most of the recommendations were not implemented because of the passive attitudes of educators and administrators. There were also other barriers to policy implementation such as the increasing cost of education, declining family support for schooling, and highly competitive college entrance examinations. Particularly, college entrance examinations influenced not only the content of courses of study but also the attitudes of students and educators toward the goal of teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, the country hasn't changed its reform goals and revived its reform agenda in the 1990s. For instance, the Curriculum Council, with an inquiry from the Minister of Education in 1996, comprehensively discussed how to help children's well-balanced development and how to educate them to be sound members of the nation and the society (Japanese Ministry of Education, 1998). The Council again recognized the importance of the emotional and moral education in response to such problematic behavior as bullying among children, their refusal to go to school, juvenile delinquency and children's poor morality and sociality. It recommended changes in teaching and grading methods as well as changes in curriculum and school hours: narrowing the scope of required courses and increasing elective courses.

2. Korea

Very much like Japan, Korean education has expanded rapidly, elementary and secondary education has become universal and higher education is highly accessible. This remarkable educational development, enabled by national planning efforts and public investments in education, contributed to mass production of human capital and resulting economic growth. However, this growth has been accompanied by serious educational problems such as schooling becoming a tool for college entrance exam passage and excessive government regulation of schools. All of this inhibited development of individual students' creativity, accommodation of differences in student aptitude and interest, and moral and personal development. Moreover, prevailing cramming institutions and private tutoring distorted schooling practices and put excessive economic burdens on parents.

Under these circumstances, the Presidential Commission on Education Reform (PCER) was established in 1994, and has been instrumental in Korean education reform (Gahng, 1988; Si-gan-gwa-gong-gan-sa, 1995). Beginning May 31, 1995, the PCER made four sequential reform proposals. For the reform of K-12 education, the proposals included new curricula for humanities and creativity, creation of autonomous school communities, and a new college admission system. While introducing more authentic student assessment, the reform requested that schools maintain a "comprehensive personal record" for each student, including all personal data and that the record be given substantial weight in the college admissions process. Each school was also required to organize a school council which involved parents and teachers in schoolwide decisionmaking. At the same time, different kinds of high schools and specialized programs were allowed to be established. To hold school districts and schools accountable, the government's administrative and financial support was linked to their performance evaluation results.

The transition of education reform has been smooth despite changes in the government regime (Kim, 1998). The seventh revision of the national curriculum was made in 1997, following the vision and framework of school reform envisioned by the PCER (Huh, 1998).

Schools could have increased time for activities that are deemed educationally appropriate for their students. However, the extent of allowed changes was minimal. For example, the number of hours for optional activities at each school's discretion increased from 0-1 hours a week to 2 hours a week in elementary schools and from 1-2 hours to 4 hours a week in middle schools. In addition, differentiated curricula were introduced in which different learning contents and objectives were prepared for different groups of students. However, little effort was made to reduce class size and increase teacher support, which makes it unlikely that this measure alone could reduce the need for private tutoring.

Despite their broad appeal to the public, those reform policies were also under criticism by educators because of their top-down approach and exclusion of teachers (KATO, 1997). While such comprehensive, sweeping school reform efforts have been made, national newspapers have reported so-called 'collapse of classrooms' or 'desolation of education' phenomena across the nation's high schools (Chosunilbo, August 23, 1999; Joongangilbo, October 20, 1999). This includes absenteeism, truancy, resistance to school authority and challenge to teachers, apathy, and other behavioral problems observed in schools and classrooms. It remains to be seen whether the above-mentioned school reform measures can successfully address these challenges.

3. England

Here the need for educational change arose from concerns about relatively low academic standards and poor student achievement (Pring, 1995). Several reports criticized schools for poor and falling standards. Many also viewed the country's poor economic performance since World War II, relative to that of other competing nations, as due largely to the poor training and inadequate skills of the workforce. Commenting on the origins of the 1988 Education Reform Act, a deputy secretary at the Department of Education and Science (DES) pointed out a growing conviction that economic well-being was being adversely affected

by the performance of an education service and a need to reduce and control public expenditure in proportion to GDP and to be more sure about getting value for money (Thomas, 1993).

The Education Act of 1988 introduced a national curriculum which was articulated in terms of attainment targets and program of study within a range of core and foundation subjects. Each subject programs of study specified what content needed to be covered for key stages 1-4. The attainment targets in each subject were at ten levels, so that progression in each subject could be established and teacher, child and parent would know how the pupil performed relative to the objectives and to other pupils. This ties in with the national tests that check whether students are meeting these targets.

The 1988 Education Reform Act sought to simultaneously centralize and decentralize control of policy and practice (Thomas, 1993). By introducing national curriculum and assessment systems, the reforms tended to shift the traditional control of local school districts to central governments. By introducing site-based management system known as the Local Management of Schools (LMS), the reforms also tended to move control over educational resources from school districts to individual schools. The 1988 reform also served to privatize education to some extent and increase school competition, enhancing the power of the client in relation to that of the provider. It introduced grant-maintained schools, which allowed schools to apply for maintenance from the central government and ceased to be maintained by the LEA.[6]

These comprehensive school reform measures were not free from criticisms. The reform took a top-down approach: teachers were excluded from the process of setting the reform agenda because the purpose was to challenge producer interest (Thomas, 1993). It was argued that the country's hasty implementation of a national curriculum and assessment led to an unmanageable curriculum and an ineffective assessment system (Silvernail, 1996). Moreover, the potential of the national curriculum to enhance equity has been questioned since it hardly ensures valuable and relevant learning experiences for working-class students (Burwood, 1992). School governance reform also raised

challenges both for schools that may opt out of district control in order to receive the extra money and preserve the status quo and for the central government that deal directly and efficiently with growing numbers of grant-maintained schools (Wholstetter and Anderson, 1994).

4. United States

Education reform in the U.S. is very difficult to characterize because the substance and structure of reform varies widely across the country. However, most of the reform efforts during the last two decades may be put under the label of standards-based systemic education reform, which was "a uniquely American adaptation of the education policies and structures of many of the world's highly developed nations" (O'Day and Smith, 1993). Adopted school reform policies varied among states but all were aimed at raising academic standards for all students and improving the quality of public school systems.

The 1983 national report, A Nation at Risk, created a crisis atmosphere, connecting U.S. economic decline with relatively poor educational performance and suggesting that educational upgrading would lead to economic revitalization (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In response to the policy challenge, many states became more active in standards-based education reform during the 1980s: the states increased course credit requirements for graduation, raised standards for teacher preparation, mandated teacher tests for certification, set higher levels for teacher pay, developed state curriculum frameworks or guides, and established new statewide student assessments (Lee, 1997). These policies, which emerged since A Nation at Risk, culminated with the 1989 national education goals (enacted into the Goals 2000 in 1994).

U.S. school governance reform was very slow and diffused. But, as with England, it may also be characterized by a combination of centralization and decentralization measures along with a privatization trend. State legislatures and state boards of education increasingly set

top-down performance standards for local boards and schools. At the same time local boards yielded autonomy to the state, they further lost control of schools through adoption of site-based management practices and local school council. This often led to local-board and central-office "disintermediation" (Wang and Walberg, 1999). Increasing numbers of charter schools in many states increased school choice and competition. At the same time, public vouchers and tax credits for private school tuition strengthened consumer power over education.

While many systemic school reform efforts have been made across the nation, findings from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed that the U.S is far from achieving the national goal of being first in the world in mathematics and science achievement by the year 2000 (NCES, 1996). The TIMSS curriculum study also pointed out the prevailing problem of current U.S. curricula, that is, "a mile wide and an inch deep" characterizing broad, superficial coverage of many topics (Schmidt et al., 1997). While these findings may enhance controversies about the adoption of voluntary national curriculum standards and assessments, their ultimate outcomes remain to be seen. Some have expressed the concern that simply tinkering toward unrealistically high goals would bring endless cycle of educational crisis and new reform (Tyack and Cuban, 1995).

Similarities and Differences in School Reform Initiatives

In each of these countries, and regardless of the issues to be addressed, reports/proposals from national commissions or government agencies played catalystic roles by giving momentum and legitimacy for nationwide school reform efforts. In the U.S., the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a prestigious ad hoc panel, issued A Nation at Risk in 1983, which triggered a wave of reform activity in the states (Koppich and Guthrie, 1993). In England, the Department of Education and Science white papers and ministerial speeches developed the theme of education reform, and some of the proposals shaped the Education Act of 1988 (Pring, 1995). In Japan, the National Council on Education Reform, set

up in 1984 as an ad hoc advisory committee to then Prime Minister Nakasone, submitted four reports which provided the principles of educational reform (Sasamori, 1993). In Korea, the Presidential Commission on Education Reform, established in 1994, has been instrumental in education reform by producing four sequential reform proposals (Gahng, 1998).

Remarkable similarities are observed in the policies of countries that share cultural and institutional heritages. On the one hand, Japan and Korea were very similar in the nature and scope of their national reforms. While the Japanese government adopted comprehensive reform proposals that included advancement of lifelong education and internationalization of education (Lincicombe, 1993), the Korean government followed a similar reform path later utilizing the same catch-phrases (KATO, 1997). This arises primarily from policy imitation as enhanced by the two countries' proximity and shared problems in education. On the other hand, policy similarity was also observed between England and the U.S., which may be attributed to their common educational issues and mutual learning/problem-solving efforts (Wholstetter & Anderson, 1994; Silvernail, 1996; Levin, 1998).

Table 1 summarizes major school reform policies in the four countries. In response to diversified individual needs for humane development as well as emerging social needs for national competitiveness in a global economy, Japan and Korea attempted to differentiate their national curricula and to decentralize their governance systems during the last two decades. In contrast, a concern with national economic performance was injected into the policy debate on educational standards and school choice in England and the U.S. during the same period. Thus, England established a national curriculum and test, and extended parental choice and market-like school competition. The U.S. promoted national- or state-level educational standard-setting activities along with an increase in school choice programs.

Table 1. Contrast of Major School Reforms in England and the U.S. vs. Korea and Japan

	England and the U.S.	Korea and Japan
Major School Reform Goals and Values	• Academic excellence • Efficiency and accountability • Focus on student outcomes • Standards and coherence • Enhanced choice among schools	• Personal development • Creativity and humanity • Focus on schooling processes • Autonomy and diversity • Enhanced choice within schools
Curriculum/ Instruction Reform Policies	Standardization/Intensification • national curriculum (England) • challenging state curriculum frameworks; raised course requirements for high school graduation (U.S.)	Differentiation/Enrichment • curriculum revision toward less requirements and more elective courses (Korea and Japan); ability grouping in core subjects (Korea)
Assessment/ Testing Reform Policies	Unification/Tightening • national tests (England) • national test plan; high-stakes statewide student assessments (U.S.)	Diversification/Loosening • diversification of college admission mechanism (Korea and Japan); less emphasis on academic records (Korea)
Governance/ Choice Reform Policies	Privatization/Competition • open enrollment; grant-maintained schools (England) • voucher; tuition tax credit; open enrollment; charter schools (U.S.)	Decentralization/Democratization • election of local school boards; school councils (Korea) • abolishment of central government's approval of superintendent (Japan)

Policy Implementation and Outcomes

Many educational researchers have observed a global convergence in both educational ideology and educational structure (Meyer et al., 1979; Ramirez and Boli, 1987). These comparative studies focused on the role of integrated transnational organizational apparatus vis-a-vis nation-states in organizing national education systems in accordance with world

educational ideologies, principles, and practices. However, little attention has been paid to educational policy forces specific to countries with different cultures and institutions and the impact of cross-cultural policy variation on global educational convergence.

Given cross-cultural policy variation toward desired educational goals and values, the central question is whether the different reform paths are leading to educational convergence between those Eastern and Western countries. As Rohlen (1983) pointed out, American education suffers from fragmentation, while Japanese education suffers from overstandardization. In the curriculum and assessment arenas, more uniform curriculum and high-stakes assessment with a focus on academic achievement were expected in England and the U.S., whereas more adaptive curricula and flexible assessments towards whole-person education were expected in Korea and Japan. Thus, these opposite policy measures, if implemented successfully, would make the two different systems more alike. At the same time, in the school governance arena, increased state power and decreased local district influence was expected in England and the U.S., whereas decreased state power and increased local school board influence was expected in Korea and Japan. Combined with curriculum and assessment reforms, school governance reforms are likely to boost educational convergence.

Educational convergence as an expected policy outcome may lag behind the cycle of school reform process. Implementation of reform policies adopted by any current government should face many barriers, including resistance from opposing groups and interruption due to political changes, and then renewal (often with changes) efforts by a subsequent government as long as the goal of reform is widely valued. Consequently, any reform process takes on a cycle which is hard to anticipate accurately, and its end results may look quite different from what was expected initially.

Whether such movements lead to intended policy outcomes depend on the culture and institution of each country affecting educational poliy implementation. Reforms that are isomorphic with the fundamental tenets of the institutional environment stand a better chance of survival than reforms that are not (Meyer and Rowan, 1978; Rowan, 1982; Cuban, 1992).

Policy success also depends on the mechanisms that coordinate or control the flow of policies and practices within the school system (Gamoran and Dreeben, 1986; Barr and Dreeben, 1988; Wong, 1994b).

The policy challenge in the U.S. and England is to implement a national curriculum or standards that will provide a common unifying learning experience and promote equity under the influences of increasingly diverse student population and market-like school competition. In Japan and Korea, on the other hand, the challenge is to implement enriched educational programs and practices that will provide student-centered learning experience and promote individual creativity under the circumstances of prevailing private tutoring for college entrance exam and eroding public support for schools and teachers.

Discussion

Examination of major school reform efforts in England, Japan, South Korea and the U.S. reveals cross-cultural policy variation in response to their historical or contemporary educational challenges. All four study countries perceived educational crises and initiated school reforms to solve their alleged problems. England and the U.S. found their school systems problematic in terms of students' low academic achievement and focused their reform efforts on improving academic excellence. Policymakers in those Western countries often found their school systems too fragmented and easy-going, and they attempted to make the systems more coherent and competitive. In contrast, Japan and Korea saw their school systems malfunctioning in terms of students' emotional and behavioral problems and focused their reform efforts on enhancing whole-person education. Policymakers in those Eastern countries often found their school systems too standardized and rigid, and they attempted to make the systems more diverse and democratic. Ironically, their contrasting school reform approaches (i.e., standardization vs. differentiation, unification vs. diversification, and privatization vs. democratization) may make their remarkably distinctive educational systems more alike.

The findings of this study indicate that the school reforms introduced were systemic policy efforts to accomplish optimal educational values, practices and outcomes in education. Countries of different culture and institutional histories tend to have quite different systems of education. In fact, different countries set their optimal educational values and processes differently on the continuum of multi-dimensional choices: academic vs. personal development, uniformity vs. diversity, centralization vs. decentralization, government vs. market. While the choice is often made based on cultural and institutional heritage, long fixation on an extreme position tends to cause a problem of proper balance. Reform policies are adopted by countries in response to their own problems, but they are often driven by globalization forces that influence their perception of the problems from a comparative perspective.

While this comparative case study suggests that cross-cultural policy variation can be better understood as global efforts to optimize national educational systems and practices, it raises a question: whether there is or can be a common, global optimal system of education. Some countries' curriculums are viewed as overstandardized, whereas some are too fragmented. Is there any common, optimal level of standardization in curriculum and assessment? How many requirements or how many choices are good enough? Too much stress on academics or too much on personal development? Too rigid or too flexible school governance? Too much central government power relative to local districts or too much district power to schools? Too much government bureaucracy or too much market? Too much provider power or too much consumer power?

While this study cannot provide a definite answer to any one of these policy questions, the study suggests the importance of understanding the role of culture and institution in school reform, learning from the experiences of other countries, avoiding extreme positions and finding and maintaining proper balance in many educational policy areas. Another important issue is whether school systems are even capable of getting wherever they find optimal. Policy implementation is also constrained by existing cultural values and institutional arrangements. This study suggests the importance of setting realistic school reform goals and making

sustained systemic policy efforts to build school capacity and overcome policy implementation barriers.

Notes

[1] Many countries tried to address similar issues under different labels such as educational excellence, productivity, efficiency, and accountability. However, they often faced the dilemmas of excellence vs. equity, state instrumentalism vs. personal development, and uniformity vs. diversity.

[2] The rise in popular support for conservative coalitions in many industrialized countries during the 1980s called into question the tradition of the "social welfare state" and raised new hopes for market-oriented initiatives.

[3] Stevenson and Stigler (1992) also showed differences in education-related attitudes and behaviors between the West and East: American parents and students tend to attribute academic achievement to student ability while Japanese counterparts attribute academic achievement to student effort.

[4] Charter schools or schools that opt out of local district control became more prevalent in England and America. However, the state power was maintained or even strengthened in both school systems due to increased curricular control and performance monitoring.

[5] It was March, 1989, some 18 months after the NCER disbanded, that the ministry revised courses of study for precollege education (Lincicombe, 1993).

[6] Some argued that grant-maintained schools and schools under LMS should be regarded as institutions on the same management continuum involving different degree of independence: the introduction of LMS did not start until April 1990, whereas grant-maintainted schools came into existence in September 1989 (Wholstetter and Anderson,

1994). In addition, some noted their different underlying motives: while the LMS was intended to make schools more responsive to parents, the organization for 'grant-maintained schools', in threatening the viability of LEAs, put pressure upon them to be more responsive to both schools and parents (Thomas, 1993).

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